

STATEMENT OF
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SUBMITTED TO THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

VA MEDICAL FACILITY CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JUNE 11, 2003

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I would like to thank Chairman Simmons, Ranking Member Rodriguez, and the entire Subcommittee on Health for calling this hearing to consider proposed construction projects of Department of Veterans' Affairs medical facilities. Chairman Simmons, I want to applaud you for your continued leadership in providing adequate funding for VA programs. The \$63.8 billion funding level set in the compromise budget resolution passed in April represents the highest total funding, the largest increase, and the largest percentage increase ever for the VA budget.

This subcommittee understands the great debt our nation owes to its veterans who selflessly put themselves in harm's way to defend the lives and liberty of others; and that this debt does not end when they leave direct service. It is with this in mind that I address the current void in sufficient healthcare facilities for Central Ohio veterans and their families.

Approximately 250,000 veterans that are served by Ohio's Central Market currently do not have adequate outpatient services and little or no option for local inpatient medical care. Columbus-area residents travel over an hour to Dayton, Chillicothe, and even Cleveland and Cincinnati to receive medical treatment at VA centers. The doctors and nurses at the outpatient clinic in Columbus work hard to offer services for veterans, however, they can not provide the needed outpatient, ambulatory, and specialty care services for which they are not equipped. Additionally, the clinic in Columbus is currently too small and understaffed for even its limited functions. Originally built in 1995, the clinic was designed to handle 135,000 annual visits; it is currently handling over 192,000 visits per year.

To better illustrate this problem, let me call on the story of one of my constituents. Mike Moehl is a 22-year veteran of the Air Force who served in both Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. Over his years in the service, he developed a debilitating ankle injury that forced him to seek treatment. To obtain the needed orthopedic care through the VA system, Mike has

been forced to get up as early as 6 a.m. and organize transportation by bus to Dayton, 75 miles away. The trip costs him a day's wages and adds stress to an already injured ankle. Sadly, Mike is not alone. Many Columbus-area veterans travel as far away as Cleveland for cardiac-specialty care. Last year, approximately 400 people from the Columbus clinic traveled to Chillicothe's VA hospital about 50 miles away. Veterans needing emergency care are first stabilized at a local hospital and then shuttled to VA facilities up to 120 miles away from their loved ones, putting them at an added, unnecessary risk during transportation.

Is it not shocking that Columbus is the nation's 15th largest city, yet it does not possess a full-service VA medical center? A survey of 20 smaller U.S. cities conducted by the *Columbus Dispatch* found that only six are without VA medical centers.

Mr. Chairman, the solution to this problem sits before you today. Through the CARES process, my office has worked hard over the past year, alongside Mr. Tiberi, Mr. Hobson, and the VA Healthcare System of Ohio, to develop a plan that meets the needs of Central Ohio's veterans. The proposed plan includes the construction of 260,000-square-foot new and expanded VA clinic and ambulatory surgical center on the grounds of the federal Defense Supply Center in Columbus. The needed funding for this project is included in the bill introduced by Mr. Hobson, H.R. 2307. The proposed Columbus facility has received the endorsement of the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A, the Franklin County Veterans Service Commission, and countless veterans and concerned citizens in my district.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I want reiterate that the present outpatient clinic in Columbus is simply inadequate to provide the services that our veterans deserve. Furthermore, the CARES Committee has evaluated Ohio's Central Market and agrees that Columbus has a shortage of primary care, outpatient specialty care, and inpatient care services. Without action to correct this wrong, the gap in healthcare service in Central Ohio will continue to widen. It is imperative that our veterans have access to the quality health care they need and deserve.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to bring this issue before you for consideration. I also want to thank you for your bold leadership and look forward to working with you on this issue.